



# **Buncombe County**

## **Community Transportation Service Plan**



**PARSONS  
BRINCKERHOFF**



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### What is a CTSP?

This Community Transportation Services Plan (CTSP) is a five-year vision for transportation in Buncombe County. The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) Public Transportation Division (PTD) recognizes the value of the CTSP and requires the County have this plan to receive federal and state funding for transit.

The focus of this plan is to evaluate the transportation services that already exist; to identify ways to maximize operating efficiencies; and to enhance the mobility options for Buncombe County citizens. Transit service is critical to many local residents; and the CTSP is a guide, a 'road map' to maximizing the effectiveness of services in a cost-efficient manner.

### What is the study's process?

During the last ten months, the study process has consisted of a series of tasks that built on one another for the final report. The first milestone evaluated the County's existing conditions and focused primarily on service characteristics and public satisfaction to understand the current challenges in both scheduling and facilitating transportation services, in addition to the opportunities available to both citizens and user agencies and organizations. Service alternatives and coordination opportunities were then explored to provide a strategically planned response to the projected mobility needs. Finally, proposed alternatives and recommendations were developed, with potential funding opportunities and realistic executable timelines for each one. Throughout the study process, feedback has been solicited from the general public; private and non-profit agencies that contract transportation to their clients and providers; government entities and officials; human service providers; and other targeted populations that are reliant upon public transit. For oversight and to provide a broad perspective, a Steering Committee was established, providing valuable and insightful input at the study's milestones.

### What are Mountain Mobility's strengths?

Overall the entire community is very supportive of Mountain Mobility. Buncombe County Commissioners, interviewed early in this CTSP study, recognize that transportation is critical to life sustaining activities, and continue to financially support Mountain Mobility.

Passenger and local human service agencies' transportation needs are being met by Mountain Mobility. The system's service is based upon 'ridesharing', a term that means the co-mingling of passengers from different agencies and the general public on the vehicles at the same time, thereby reducing the shared costs per mile and increasing the efficiency of operations. Mountain Mobility has a policy that no one who is eligible or entitled to transportation assistance and who is enrolled in a funded program is denied service (e.g., for capacity constraints, etc.). When surveyed, passengers identified many positive attributes of the system including clean vehicles and courteous, safe bus operators.

The talented and caring staff that administers and operates transportation in the County is a strong point and an asset. Mountain Mobility has two contractors: Land-of-Sky Regional Council (LOSRC) which fulfills the administrative role; and McDonald Transit Associates, Inc. handles operations. It was observed that staff is highly qualified and proficient in utilizing advanced technology, including RouteMatch (the dispatch and scheduling software for operations) and the fleet camera surveillance system (monitors safety and security matters). Both of these transit technologies support continued operating efficiencies. Additionally, County staff has historically been proactive and aggressive at

pursuing federal and state grant monies which ultimately reduces the amount of local funds needed to sustain the existing operations.

### What are the observed transportation needs in Buncombe County?

There is a clear need for transit service throughout Buncombe County. Mountain Mobility currently transports a significant number of passengers (roughly 600 trips per day), and the demand for public transportation is continually increasing with population growth and aging, long-term residents. Continued growth in transit demand can be expected. Based on projections from North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management (NCOSBM), in Buncombe County over a 20-year period there is an anticipated 20% increase in overall population and 40% increase in elderly population (a target market for Mountain Mobility).

Customers are very appreciative and satisfied with Mountain Mobility's service and performance; however, comments indicating areas of improvement focused on the timeliness of pick-ups to their intended destinations and lengthy trip travel times, both of which are indicators that current resources are 'stretched' (i.e. exceeding capacity).

Demographic and socioeconomic information was evaluated to better locate areas with concentrations of transit dependent populations (i.e. segments of the population that are most likely to need and be reliant on public transit service). The evaluation indicated that the greatest opportunities for potential transit customers are located within and just beyond the Asheville city limits, along I-40 to the east and west, along I-26 to the north, and along US-25 to the south.

There are also many requests for transportation service in the rural areas of the County. The limited roadway network and elevation changes are some of the contributing factors to the lengthy trips and time requirements, which often tie up resources (i.e. vehicles).

### Is the County well positioned to meet the needs?

Based on an evaluation of the study area characteristics, transit service appears to be well-placed to meet the majority of people's travel needs within Buncombe County. The Trailblazer routes currently travel along three of the four axes where demand is placed (north, east, and west). The south axis is served by the City's ART transit system. In addition to the deviated-fixed route Trailblazer routes, residents have the opportunity to schedule a demand response trip to and from any geographic area within Buncombe County.

A number of counties in the region travel to Buncombe County for medical trips. In some cases, specialty medical facilities (i.e. dialysis centers and pain clinics) are not available in surrounding or neighboring counties, and the nearest facility is in Buncombe County. Another major destination is, of course, the Charles George Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VA Hospital) for veterans' and their families' services. Therefore, short- and long-term recommendations have been made and will be explained in the pages that follow.

### What alternatives / recommendations emerged from the CTSP?

As previously stated, Buncombe County can anticipate growth, particularly in the elderly population, over the next 20 years. Thus, Mountain Mobility must take steps now to prepare for the future. In order to keep up with this demand, Mountain Mobility should increase its fleet size by 20% (twelve vehicles) over the next five years, and also evaluate the need to retain vehicles that are targeted for disposed at the end of the vehicles' useful life (dependent on mileage and/or time in active service).

Besides the above-mentioned increase in Mountain Mobility's fleet, the recommendations presented as part of this Plan were developed as the framework for building upon the successful efforts that have already been made by Buncombe County. The following aim to increase the mobility options for residents:

1. Increase education and marketing efforts.
2. Analyze the rates charged to agencies.
3. Modify the RIDE Voucher Program.
4. Perform a comprehensive route analysis to determine if route restructuring and/or a small expansion would improve level of service during peak times.
5. Upgrade / replace the camera surveillance system.
6. Initiate a feasibility study to evaluate the need for a new facility and screen potential sites.
7. Enhanced coordination with surrounding counties.

### Has there been early success?

Buncombe County has already taken proactive measures to institute modifications to the RIDE Voucher Program (Recommendation #3). Achieving multiple objectives (reducing over capacity on vehicles; expedited use of grant monies; and enhanced customer satisfaction), up to five transportation vouchers (total value of \$50) rather than only one will be allowed starting July 1, 2015. This change in policy and practice meets a transportation need that was voiced, particularly expressed by workers at the Industry of the Blind, during the April public outreach meeting.

The County has always been proactive, even aggressive, at pursuing federal and state grant monies. Such is the case with its recent award of a \$45,000 APTAP Grant, with monies targeted to conduct a Comprehensive Route Analysis Study (Recommendation #4). The objective is to analyze and evaluate how Mountain Mobility can implement structured routes in the most efficient manner in terms of the public's existing travel patterns. Another ADTAP Grant will support the purchase of Interactive Voice Response (IVR) technology that will enhance customer services by providing night-before trip reminders, confirmation or cancellation of trip requests, service alerts, etc. The technology should decrease no-shows and cancellations, while also improving on-time performance and utilize staff and vehicles more efficiently.

### Why is continued public outreach essential?

Mountain Mobility aims to address concerns and complaints from the riding public and agency representatives; however, continued educational and on-going dialog is recommended as part of the public outreach process (Recommendation #1).

It was observed that some passengers have unrealistic expectations regarding Mountain Mobility's operations, and continued education is needed to explain that transportation service is provided using the 'shared ride' model (the vehicles are not their personal taxis). Passengers and human service agency staff who are well educated about the policies and procedures of the transit system can contribute significantly to a fully effective and functioning system. The number of passenger complaints / inquiries is also decreased.

Educating passengers should not be seen as a one-time effort. It must be something that is sustained and repeated on a periodic basis, both to reinforce the information to long-time passengers and to make it available to new and potential riders. This recommendation strives to serve as both a public relations and an education effort to improve the functioning of Mountain Mobility and its performance.

### How can enhanced coordination be achieved?

As previously stated, Recommendation #7 focuses on opportunities to enhance coordination with surrounding counties based upon seating capacity and scheduling, including transit systems in Region B and counties farther west and north. This coordination of rides could take many forms:

- Transportation providers in other counties could coordinate with Mountain Mobility to pick up passengers residing in the outlying areas of Buncombe County, and transporting those riders (along with their riders);
- Transportation providers in other counties could coordinate with Mountain Mobility to meet a Mountain Mobility vehicle to transfer Buncombe County riders vehicles operated by other agencies, and that provider would transport all riders to their destinations; and
- Other providers could use their vehicles to assist Mountain Mobility rather than sitting idle or going off-duty while awaiting the completion of their residents' business and the return trips.

### How will funding change in the next five years?

Funding from several federal transit programs is allocated based on whether an area is classified as urban or rural, and each program includes specific requirements and restrictions on the use of funds. Furthermore, additional restrictions are implemented when an urban area has a population of greater than 200,000. A portion of Buncombe County is now defined as an urbanized area and having a population of 200,000 or more based on the 2010 Census. The NCDOT-PTD has taken steps to move systems operating in urban areas into the funding arena created by the growth in population and "flipping the pyramid" to make new rules for all funding programs, including state funding for ROAP and state match funds for Section 5311 and other programs. These changes affect transit systems across North Carolina.

The Community Transportation system in Buncombe County has been primarily funded with Section 5311 federal funds and state funds because the system is providing human service and general public transportation to individuals living both inside the urbanized area and in rural areas of Buncombe County. In April, NCDOT advised certain systems, including Buncombe County, that beginning in FY2016, the state would no longer offer the same level of state funding to Community Transportation systems that are recognized by FTA as an urban transit service provider. The NCDOT urged systems to begin conversing with the MPO about Section 5307 funding for services provided in the urbanized area. As per Recommendation #2, Buncombe County should continue to analyze the rates charged to contracting agencies to ensure that the charges are in line with operating costs.

### What are the next steps?

Following adoption of the CTSP by the Buncombe County Board of Commissioners, Buncombe County and Mountain Mobility staff should immediately begin planning initiatives for implementing activities outlined in the Implementation Schedule (Section 6.3). This may include a more detailed outline of specific activities involved and the timeframe for work to be conducted, assignment of responsibilities, etc. Adjustments to the process and timeline will need to be made over time due to regulatory changes and funding mechanisms available. Progress reports should be discussed at regular staff meetings and with the Community Transportation Advisory Board. Every success should be recognized throughout the implementation of the plan. Buncombe County's vision is for a "caring community in harmony with its environment where citizens succeed, thrive, and realize their potential." Mountain Mobility will continue to play an important role in providing transit connections that people need to help make this vision a reality.